

BOOK REVIEW **OPEN ACCESS**

A Grammar of Elfdalian

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A Grammar of Elfdalian

By Yair Sapir & Olof Lundgren

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The Elfdalian language (*Övdalska*) occasionally makes headlines in popular media as a ‘lost Viking language’ found deep in the Swedish forest. Sensationalism aside, Elfdalian proves a perennial case study for a multitude of linguistic subfields, from historical linguistic studies of North Germanic, to sociolinguistic studies of a minority language and its revitalization efforts, to generativist studies of its syntax and phonology.

A growing number of reference materials also exist for Elfdalian, including grammars and dictionaries. Until now these reference materials have been in Swedish, creating a barrier for many who may otherwise be interested in the language.

With *A Grammar of Elfdalian*, authors Yair Sapir and Olof Lundgren equip the scholarly community with an invaluable resource, making the Elfdalian language accessible through the medium of English rather than Swedish. Its availability in both paperback and e-book form further expands the potential audience for the study of Elfdalian.

Sapir and Lundgren’s new grammar of Elfdalian differs from previous standard works in more ways than choice of metalanguage. Their aim, laid out explicitly in the first sentence of the

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preface, has been “to provide an exhaustive account of ‘preserved’ or ‘Late Classical Elfdalian (LCE)’ [...] as well as one of its modern varieties, ‘Revitalised LCE’” (p. xvii). With a broad target audience of scholars, language learners, and teachers, *A Grammar of Elfdalian* is part descriptive grammar, part practical grammar.

The book opens with a discursive introduction examining the history and current sociolinguistic context of the Elfdalian language, including two new hypotheses for its origin of the language and placement within the North Germanic linguistic branch. Dating the arrival of Proto-Norse into the Dalarna region between the sixth and eighth centuries CE, the authors argue that Dalecarlian (that is, Elfdalian and the surrounding language variants) constituted a separate subbranch of North Germanic by the thirteenth century. Influence from both East and West Nordic varieties has made it difficult to place Elfdalian/Dalecarlian on the Nordic family tree, and the authors agree more research into the linguistic phylogeny of this subbranch is needed from a historical perspective.

Following the introductory chapter, the grammar is arranged in a rather typical setup for the genre, beginning with a chapter on the phonology and orthography (Chapter 2), followed by ten chapters on different word classes (Chapters 3-11), a chapter on word order (Chapter 12), and a chapter on word formation (Chapter 13). The book’s final chapter (Chapter 14) contains a selection of texts in Elfdalian, together with English translations, spanning a variety of prose genres.

Sapir and Lundgren’s presentation of Elfdalian grammar expands upon previous grammars, specifically Lars Levander’s (1925–1928) *Dalmålet: Beskrivning och historia* and Åkerberg and Nyström’s (2012) *Älvdalsk grammatik*. Readers familiar with highly inflectional North Germanic languages such as Icelandic, Faroese, or Old Norse will therefore be met with surprises in the division of inflectional classes which derives from these works. Verbal classes (Chapter 7), for example, are divided according to ending, meaning all strong verbs are grouped into a single *class* though separated into *gradation series*, whereas weak verbs are divided into seven *classes*.

However, where these previous grammars often give arbitrary labels, for example to noun classes (Chapter 3), Sapir and Lundgren take a more descriptive approach using abbreviations which, though they may appear cryptic at first, are easily interpretable. For example, the noun class which earlier grammars label *FVII* (feminine, seventh class), Sapir and Lundgren call *F5-Wk-LS-V*, a shorthand for *feminine (fifth class), weak, long-syllabled, ending in a stressed vowel* (p. 97). This descriptive label makes the division into noun classes more accessible those who are approaching the material for the first time. It should be noted that this shorthand is introduced using an example that does not exist (*M1-St-LS-i*, p. 81), one of a handful of editorial errors which can easily be remedied in future editions of the grammar.

Especially praiseworthy of this volume is the plethora of examples from the language as it is used. In addition to the text samples in Chapter 14, which give longer prosaic strings of text, shorter phrases and sentences are found throughout, giving the reader a fuller impression of how the language works. In these examples, the Elfdalian text is written in bold with an

English translation underneath, often with extra commentary in parentheses. For example, in the section on the use of articles the reader learns through the example **Addum rakkan** (lit. ‘We had *the* dog’; p. 74) that the use of the definite article indicates an imperfective (‘We used to have a dog’). Examples often take the role of a practical description, such as “To express an event in a certain decade, century or millennium, *å + tali.DAT.SG.DEF* are used.” (p. 171). Inconsistencies arise between descriptions and the examples given, however, which can leave the reader in doubt as to which is correct. For example, in the section on dates (6.5.3) the reader is told that years are expressed by the word *åreð*, in the definite, whereas the example given is **år 2022**, in the indefinite (p. 172).

The chapter *Lexicon, word formation and names* (Chapter 13) ties back to the introductory chapter in its discussion of the chronological layers of the vocabulary. The chapter concludes with a fascinating discussion about the farm names and their uses, providing an introduction to the culture that is found in the speech community.

Grammars of minority languages are never devoid of politics; here *A Grammar of Elfdalian* is no exception. The authors are not shy in admitting that revitalization efforts, including attempts at official recognition in Sweden, are one of the driving factors behind their decision to write such a grammar (p. xvii), also noting that this official recognition is likely to double the number of speakers (p. 3). Internal politics from the language community are also present in *A Grammar of Elfdalian*, for example in the decision to focus on Late Classical Elfdalian and its modern revitalized form rather than Modern Elfdalian. Sapir and Lundgren furthermore stress throughout their use of ‘standard’ Elfdalian orthography as established by the language council Råðdjärum in 2005. These decisions are both justifiable and well-documented in *A Grammar of Elfdalian*, though they also have the consequence that differences in spelling occur from even the most recent standard works for Elfdalian, namely Bengt Åkerberg and Gunnar Nyström’s grammar (2012) and, to a lesser extent, Lars Steensland’s dictionary (2021). Readers who are introduced to the Elfdalian language through Sapir and Lundgren’s work would benefit from a (however brief) description of what distinguishes LCE from Modern Elfdalian and the differences in spelling they will meet when consulting these other resources.

All in all, Sapir and Lundgren have succeeded in their primary aim to provide a thorough description of Late Classical Elfdalian in *A Grammar of Elfdalian*. Their clear presentation of Elfdalian grammar through the medium of English means a new wave of scholars and language enthusiasts can find this ‘lost Viking language’.

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